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UNCLAS RANGOON 001423

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: EVEN THE DEAD ARE OPPRESSED

1. SUMMARY: The Burmese junta on November 1 ordered the demolition of a large Christian cemetery in a Karen neighborhood of Rangoon. Graves not exhumed by family members of the deceased by December 2 will be bulldozed, as the regime plans to build a condominium on the site. Emboff witnessed the macabre scene of scores of families grimly exhuming the bodies of loved ones during a visit to the cemetery. END SUMMARY.

2. Sawbwagyigone cemetery, located in Insein Township, is a large, 100-year old cemetery containing the graves of over 5,000 people, mostly Karen and Shan Christians. It is reportedly the largest Christian cemetery within Rangoon's city limits. After the November 1 All Souls Day ceremony, the community was told by the Yangon Peace and Development Council about government plans to build a condo on the site and the December 2 deadline for removing the graves.

3. Emboff visited the cemetery with an FSN November 6. Scores of families were busy breaking open the graves of their relatives. A typical grave includes a two-foot high brick and concrete structure over a coffin buried just below ground level. Some people carried black garbage sacks to gather remains from decomposed coffins. More recently buried coffins were being taken away intact. Many Christian ministers were there with distraught families to offer prayers and solace. The FSN showed Emboff the graves of his mother and sister and discussed his family's plans to dig up and move their remains. A neighboring grave had already been exhumed, but for some reason the bare skull was left sitting on the remaining above-ground structure.

4. Municipal authorities told families the government would provide ground for re-burial in a distant, undeveloped area. One family member said, "but what if they want to use that land in five years; won't we just have to move the graves again?" A Karen doctor has reportedly offered to buy the cemetery land from the GOB to prevent a condo from being built there, even though the cemetery must go. The community backs this proposal, as the doctor would build a Karen cultural center there that could honor the memories of the twice departed.

5. Insein Township is populated largely by members of the Karen ethnic minority. Emboff talked with an elderly Karen woman at the cemetery who said she was 9 years old during the Karen uprising of 1949 and remembers government aircraft bombing Insein - at that time a Karen rebel stronghold. She said her 16 year old brother died fighting the Burmese government in the revolt, another was still MIA, and that her cousin had been captured and imprisoned for years. Many cars and vans of families gathered for the exhumations sported Karen flag bumper stickers or window decals.

6. The regime in 2000 ordered the obliteration of a Chinese Buddhist cemetery three miles down the road. Today a still-unfinished garish municipal hall occupies that site. Muslim and other cemeteries within the city limits have suffered similar fates.

7. COMMENT: The families exhuming the remains of their loved ones were grim and forlorn, but Emboff heard no rumblings of outrage or dissent. One wonders what it would take for the downtrodden, docile citizenry of Burma to mount even a symbolic protest. Perhaps the old woman, who lost much of her family in 1949, feels she and her family have already paid too high a price for acting on their political convictions. End Comment.  
MARTINEZ